

# George Washington

1732-1799 First President of the United States.

When George Washington was fourteen years old, he was offered a chance to become a midshipman in the British Navy. If he accepted, he would be taking the first step on a ladder that would lead to a career serving the King of England.

The year was 1746, and Virginia was one of England's thirteen colonies in North America. Washington, who had been born in Virginia on February 22, 1732, lived on a farm there with his mother and five younger brothers and sisters. His father, a planter of tobacco, had died three years earlier.

With his education completed, Washington was unhappy under his mother's rule, but his older half brother Lawrence saw a way out for George. Lawrence had married into the family

of the Fairfaxes, who owned a large amount of land. When the captain of a Royal Navy vessel told the rich Fairfaxes that he had a vacancy, they thought of George.

The offer resulted in tearful scenes at the farm. At one point Mrs. Washington consented, and George packed his bags. Then she changed her mind. No, he could not go, she said, and he unpacked.

Historians have wondered what would have happened if Washington had accepted service under the British flag. Who, if anybody, could have replaced him as commander of the Continental Army in the Revolutionary War? Who would have become the first President of the United States?

At the time, Washington was disap-

pointed, but the Fairfax connection soon gave him another opportunity. When he was sixteen, he went with a party into the wilderness of the Shenandoah Valley to map Fairfax properties there. This experience taught him enough about making maps so he could set himself up in business as a surveyor.

As he was starting to make his way in the world, his brother Lawrence died. Tragic as the death was, it presented another opportunity for Washington. Lawrence left his estate, called Mount Vernon, to his younger brother. He also left vacant a position as an officer in the Virginia militia.

Washington applied for the job. Despite his youth and his lack of experience, he got an appointment as a major because he had influential friends. And so, in 1753, at the age of twenty-one, his long military career began. It was an exciting time for him, with the English and French fighting for control of the Ohio Valley.

"I heard the bullets whistle and believe me, there is something charming in the sound," he wrote home. But even though he liked the soldier's trade, his first adventures in the field were a disaster. He commanded a small force that had to surrender to the French, mainly because he had shown ignorance of military tactics in the face of a superior enemy. But he learned from his

mistakes, as he later demonstrated.

When a new British force under the command of Major General Edward Braddock arrived in 1755, Washington joined him in a fresh campaign to recapture the disputed area. It turned out to be another disaster. An invisible enemy hiding behind trees poured shots into the advancing British, wounding Braddock and killing most of his officers. Washington had two horses shot out from under him and four bullets tore through his coat, but he was not wounded. He took command of the battered force and retreated.

Despite his demonstrated skill, Washington was unable to get the commission that he wanted as a regular officer in the British army. As a result, his attention turned back to his farm and domestic affairs. On January 6, 1759, he married Martha Dandridge Custis, a rich widow with two children. They settled down to life at Mount Vernon.

He loved the land, never tiring of the chores of a working farm. An imposing-looking man, he was six feet two inches in height. He liked to hunt foxes, bet on racehorses, flirt with attractive women, play cards, and fish. He was, according to Thomas Jefferson, "the best horseman of his age."

Washington's peaceful life changed in 1775 after the first shots of the Revo-

lutionary War were fired at Lexington and Concord in Massachusetts. It was clear that war was at hand. By unanimous vote on June 15, 1775, the Continental Congress turned to Washington, America's most experienced soldier. Then forty-three years old, he was appointed commander-in-chief of the new American army.

He took up his command outside Boston a few days after the Battle of Bunker Hill. The British occupied Boston, but the Americans camped around the city. It was months before his new troops were trained and ready for action.

Silently in the night, on March 4, 1776, Washington concentrated his men overlooking Boston harbor. Faced with a threat to their fleet from American cannon, the British withdrew from Boston. It was an American victory even though not a shot had been fired. That action took place even before the Declaration of Independence was adopted on July 4, 1776.

But the military situation looked bad for the Americans because they faced an experienced British army. After leaving Boston, the British captured New York by defeating Washington on Long Island, in Manhattan, and at White Plains. Washington retreated into New Jersey and then across the Delaware River into Pennsylvania.

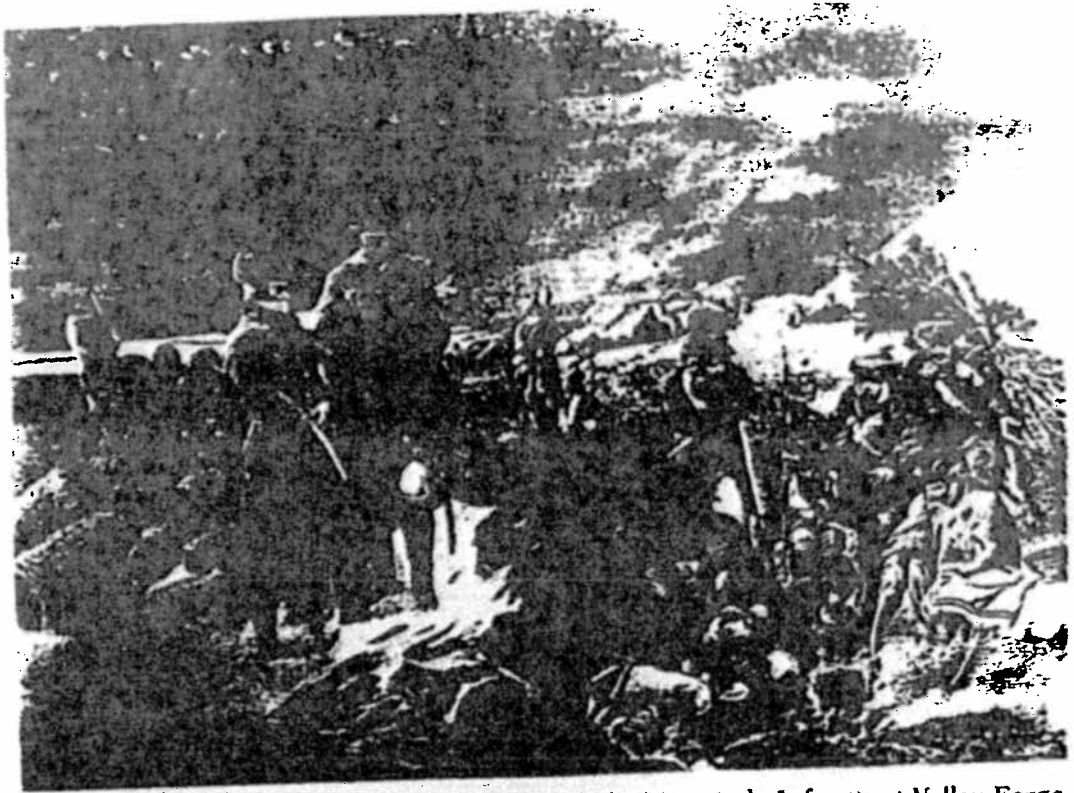
He realized that the only military

choice open to him was to conduct hit-and-run raids, avoiding a major battle with the superior British force. On Christmas night of 1776, he ferried his troops across the ice-filled Delaware River into Trenton. There, he surprised the Hessian troops that the British had hired to fight for them. They surrendered.

The biggest American success, however, came in 1777 when its forces defeated the British at Saratoga in upstate New York. This victory had major international consequences. The French recognized the independence of the former colonies and declared war on England.

With the coming of winter, Washington's soldiers settled down at Valley Forge in Pennsylvania. Many of them lacked shoes or heavy clothing. In addition, Washington faced a threat from a group of ambitious generals who wanted his job as commander-in-chief. Dignified as usual, he remained calmly firm until his loyal officers and men rallied behind him.

Soon the focus of the war shifted to the South, where Lord Cornwallis led a British army. Now a new element was added to the battle scene—the French. In the summer of 1780, Washington was joined by a French army. By the following summer they were marching together to Yorktown in Vir-



An engraving by H. B. Hall shows Washington with the Marquis de Lafayette at Valley Forge. Courtesy of The New-York Historical Society, New York City.

ginia, where Cornwallis was fortifying a base. When the French fleet arrived in Chesapeake Bay, Cornwallis was trapped.

The surrender of Cornwallis on October 19, 1781, effectively ended the fighting in the American Revolution, but two years were to drag on before a peace treaty was signed. During that time Washington had to keep his army together, a difficult task because Congress, always short of money, had cut funds for the troops.

The lack of support from Congress led to a major crisis. In May of 1782, some of his officers urged Washington to become king of the United States as a means of providing an effective government. He rejected the idea immediately.

But that did not end the discontent. The unpaid officers proposed to march on Philadelphia to take over the government. To stop this new threat, Washington spoke to them at his headquarters in Newburgh, New York, in

March of 1783. He told them he thought Congress would act justly, but he did not seem to be making an impression on them.

He remembered a letter he had in his pocket to read. He took it out but, apparently confused, did not read it. Finally, he reached into another pocket and pulled out a pair of eyeglasses.

"Gentlemen," he said, "you will permit me to put on my spectacles, for I have grown not only gray but almost

blind in the service of my country." That simple statement made many of the soldiers weep. As one historian wrote, by that one sentence "Washington had saved the United States from tyranny and civil discord."

After the treaty of peace was signed in 1783, Washington returned to Mount Vernon. At the age of fifty-one, he was ready to spend his remaining years with his wife and family. They had no children of their own, but Mrs. Washing-



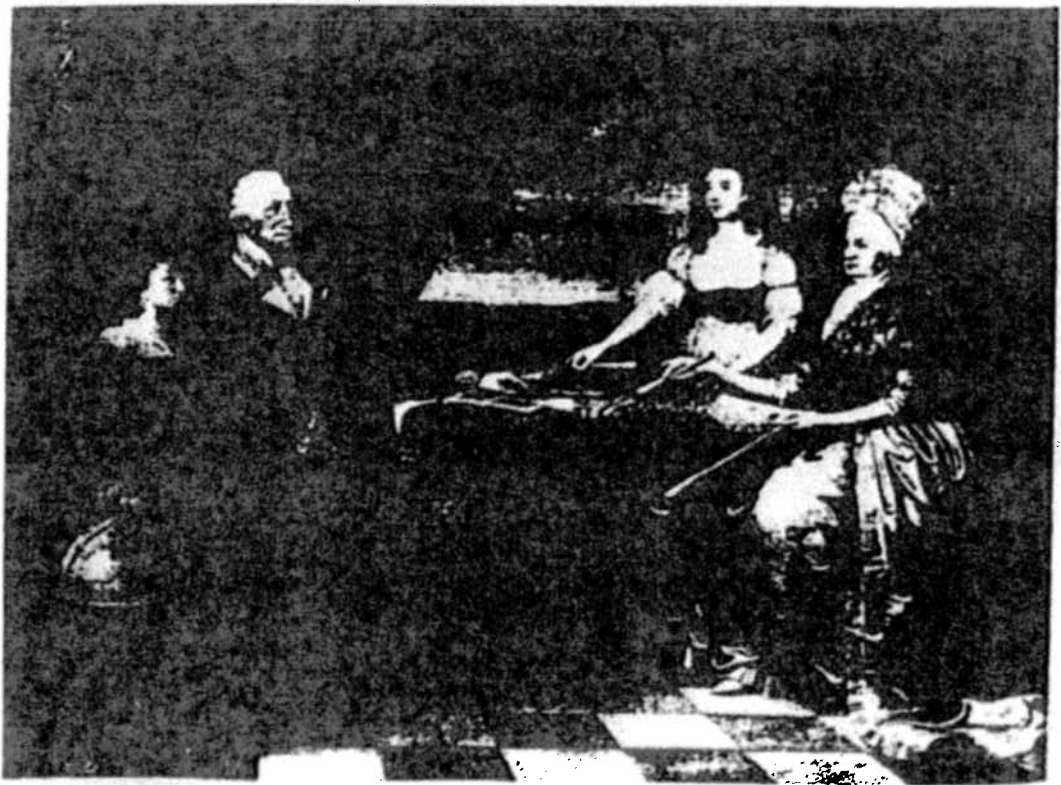
In 1876, Currier and Ives published the lithograph *Washington's Farewell to the Officers of His Army*. Courtesy of the Museum of the City of New York, Harry T. Peters Collection.

ton's son from her previous marriage and his children visited them frequently.

Political developments called Washington out of retirement when the new Constitution of the United States was adopted in 1787. There was no question about who the first President would be, and the electoral college voted for Washington unanimously. He took the

oath of office on April 30, 1789, in a ceremony on Wall Street in New York City, then the nation's capital.

The major problem facing the new nation was money. A detailed plan was proposed by Alexander Hamilton, appointed by Washington as Secretary of the Treasury. Hamilton proposed to take over the debts of the former colonies, raising the necessary funds by sell-



Edward Savage painted *The Washington Family* in about 1796, at the end of George Washington's second term as President. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington; Andrew W. Mellon Collection.

ing bonds. He thought this would show the strength of the new government. But Thomas Jefferson, the Secretary of State, opposed the scheme.

With Washington's approval, a compromise was reached. Jefferson agreed to Hamilton's plan, and Hamilton agreed to move the nation's capital south. As a result, the capital moved temporarily to Philadelphia in 1790, while the new capital city was being built on the Potomac River, not far from Mount Vernon.

The split in Washington's Cabinet did not end. The party backing Hamilton became known as Federalists, supporting a strong central government. The Jeffersonians were called Anti-Federalists, or Democratic-Republicans. Washington belonged to neither faction, but he generally supported Hamilton's policies.

When election day in 1792 arrived, it was clear that Washington was still needed. Once again the electoral college voted for him unanimously, and he was inaugurated in Philadelphia on March 4, 1793. His second term was marked by a crisis at home and war abroad.

The domestic problem arose because of a tax on whiskey, imposed to raise funds for the new nation. When some backwoodsmen refused to pay the tax, Washington sent a small army into west-

ern Pennsylvania. The show of force had its effect; the Whiskey Rebellion ended.

Things were not so easy in foreign affairs. When England and France went to war again, Washington issued a neutrality proclamation in an attempt to keep America at peace. Then he sent John Jay to London to settle some problems with England, which resulted in Jay's Treaty of 1794. In the following year, he sent Thomas Pinckney to reach an agreement with Spain on the borders of her colonies in America.

Weary of the presidency, Washington put his thoughts about the nation's future into a Farewell Address in 1796. He criticized the growth of political factions at home, but his most important point was a warning against entangling alliances with any foreign power.

In 1797, at the age of sixty-five, Washington left office and went home to Mount Vernon, content, as he said, "to make and sell a little flour . . . to repair houses going to ruin . . . to amuse myself in rural pursuits."

He died at Mount Vernon on December 14, 1799, at the age of sixty-seven. One of his colleagues said, in a funeral oration, that Washington was "first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen." Today, almost two hundred years later, the words are still true.

# Washington's Biography

## Questions

1. Who prevented George Washington from joining the British Navy?
2. How did George Washington acquire Mount Vernon?
3. How old was Washington when he was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the American Army during the Revolution?
4. In May of 1782, what did some of Washington's officers urge him to do?
5. Where was Washington sworn in as President of the United States?
6. Where was the nation's capital moved to in 1790?
7. Generally speaking, was Washington more inclined to agree with Alexander Hamilton or Thomas Jefferson?
8. What did Washington warn the nation against in his farewell address?
9. How old was Washington when he retired from public office?
10. What famous quote was said of Washington at his funeral?